

Rev. A. de Sola's Report

578.

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

TO

THE GRADUATES IN ARTS

OF THE

University of McGill College,

MONTREAL.

DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL CONVOCATION, TUESDAY, 3rd MAY, 1864,

BY

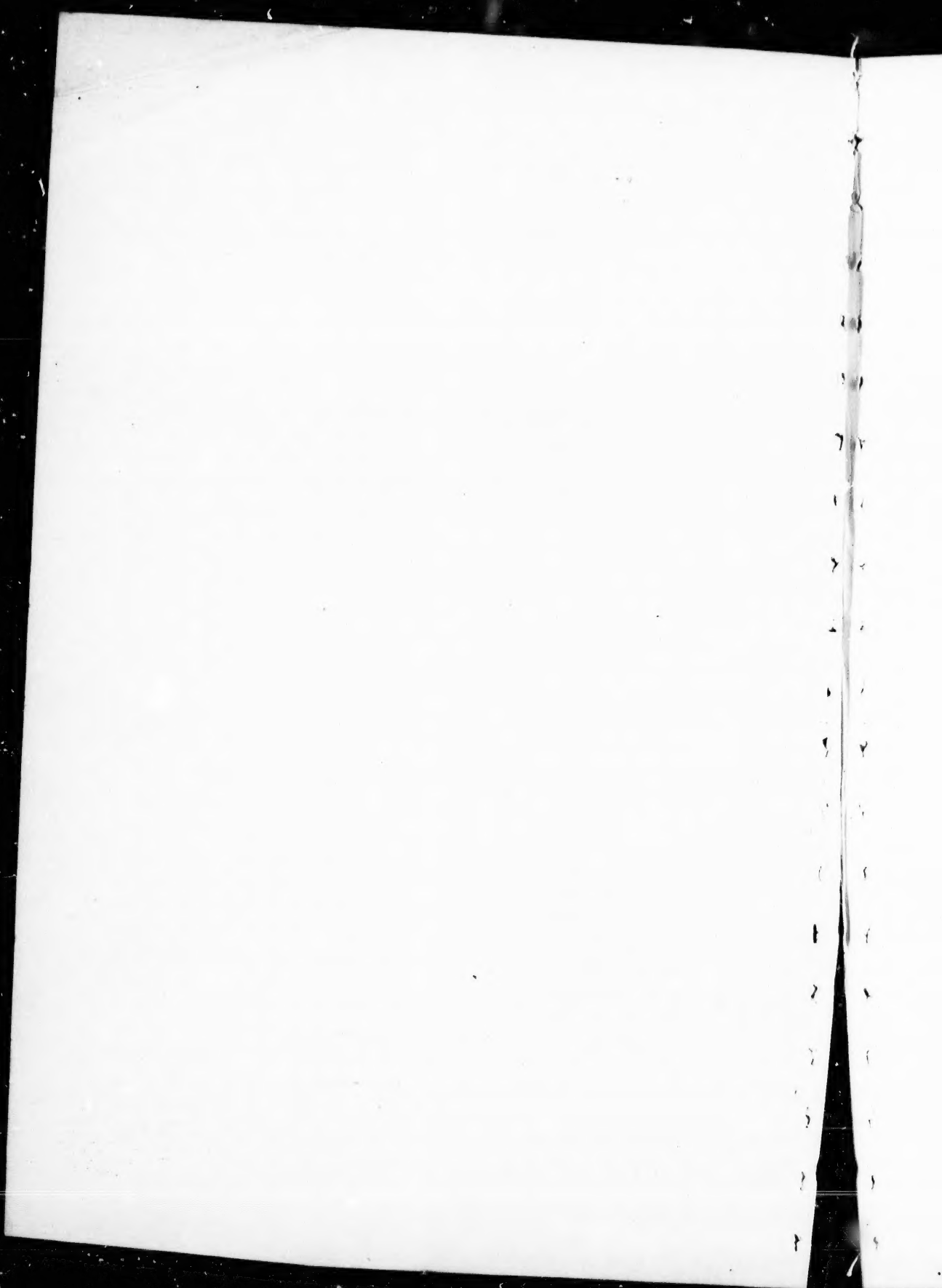
THE REV. A. DE SOLA, LL.D.,

PROFESSOR OF HEBREW AND ORIENTAL LITERATURE.

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1864.



ADDRESS.

Gentlemen, Graduates in Arts :

The Academic distinctions and honors which have just been bestowed upon you, constitute a fitting and happy termination of your connexion with this University in the capacity of students. For these distinctions you have long, well and earnestly labored. And while I tender to you the warm congratulations of your Professors—may I not say of the assembled University?—on this gratifying termination of the past, I would ask you to afford me a brief and patient hearing, while I proceed to say a few words as to your future. I would ask you, further, to accept the words of advice and admonition I shall offer you on behalf of the Faculty, as best proof of the complete satisfaction with which they have viewed your proficiency, industry and general good conduct,—as best proof that these have begotten in them sentiments of esteem for you, and a warm interest which will not cease with the relations they have hitherto borne to you, but will follow you from these walls to and through every stage of your future careers.

And now that you are about taking the first steps in your respective careers, it becomes my duty to forewarn you, that the Divine Creator has subjected everything in the physical, intellectual and moral worlds, to the dominion of immutable, unerring laws; and in proportion as you are acquainted with these laws, and conform to them, will you be virtuous, prosperous and happy. Endowed, as you are, with conscience and will, this universal prevalence of law invests you with duties and responsibilities infinitely great and important to yourselves and society. One of the first of these duties to which I would now direct your attention is that which refers to the preservation of your bodily health. The progress of civilization seems to have directed its efforts, almost wholly, to the education of man's intellectual capacity, while it has raised countless impediments to the development of his physical powers. Now, this is repeating that sad and fatal mistake against which the sages

of antiquity loudly and constantly raised their voice. The literature of the Hebrews contains a mine, almost unexplored though it be, of unspeakably valuable constitutions on the subject of physical training,—and what the Greeks and Romans have said and done in this regard, I need not tell you. You know it, and you know that it was the neglect of physical training and of athletic exercises among the two last mentioned nations, and the spread among them of luxury and effeminaey, with their thousand attendant evils, that swept them out of existence. I will suppose, however, that you are thoroughly impressed with the importance of corporal health,—that you fully perceive its indispensableness to the proper exercise of the mental faculties,—that you well know genius, however brilliant, cannot long dwell in a sickly frame,—that bodily vigour is not less essential to success in the learned professions than in the paths of commerce and other yet more laborious fields of human industry and occupation. I will further suppose you to be fully aware that, by proper physical training, weakly organized forms have been strengthened, and an extraordinary degree of muscular activity attained,—that not only has such a training developed muscle, but has even altered and improved solid bone, while it has completely removed many painful nervous affections. Let me, however, remind you, and at the same time all our alumni present, that it will little avail you to know the theory, if you neglect the practice. The necessity for cultivating the physical powers has been recognized by this University in the establishment of a Gymnasium; but I am sorry to think that students do not seem sufficiently to recognize the importance of physical training, since it is not so commonly and frequently visited as it should be. But let me ask that its exercises be not disdained, as occupation only fitting for idle juniors,—and let it be remembered that busy Cæsar, grave Cicero, and other heroes and sages of antiquity, thought it of the first moment to cultivate such exercises. And although I may not expect that the instructing and other officers of this University may themselves frequently engage in throwing the discus and other feats of the ancient *athletæ*, yet may I express the hope that such exercises may not only constitute an essential part of the regular duties of the student, but that preëminence in them may be deemed worthy of reward, as in other graver departments. I have enlarged somewhat on this topic; but when the press of a neighbouring people is so loudly raising the cry of physical deterioration, and propounds, instead of a proper system of physical training, schemes which are either ludicrous or

revolting, the remarks just made may be deemed neither unseasonable nor superfluous.

You will readily infer, gentlemen, from what I have just said, that I desire your physical training should be made subservient to, and as a means for, your mental improvement. A valuable writer of the last century quaintly remarks: "While the man of body takes the greatest care to set out and adorn the part for which he thinks himself the most valuable, the man of mind will bestow most pains in improving that mind." To this let me add, that the law for improving the mind and maintaining it in its healthy state is, just as with our physical being, to exercise constantly and successively every one of its faculties. Now, I cannot suppose that you see no further use for these exercises; or, in other words, that henceforth you regard your education as complete. Gentlemen, you have only gathered a few of its materials, and acquired merely the elements of that discipline which is indispensable to the improvement of your progressive nature. If you are to be known for enlarged views, sound thinking, and just principles, you must determine ever to regard yourselves as mere students; ever to remember that your college training has been merely introductory to the course of study requisite to fit you for permanent usefulness, and that manhood, like youth, has its appropriate course of study which it cannot afford to slight or set aside, under penalty of inferiority or humiliation. Whatever tends, then, to withdraw you from the advanced studies you undertake, should be avoided as evil and injurious. So should you regard those greatest enemies of mental and moral progress—bad books and bad associates. While you remained under the safe guidance of the College, while your time was mainly occupied with the healthy exercises it imposed, there was not any great danger of your tasting other than that proper nourishment, as much required by the mind as by the body to secure healthy developement.—"Animi cultus quasi quidam humanitatis cibus." But now that you go forth finally from these halls, you become more exposed to the pestilential influence of such writings as tend, by their dangerous and seducing sentiments, by the fascination of their style, to weaken your character; to relax the firmness of your moral nature; to taint, if not thoroughly corrupt, your heart; to engender low and debasing tastes and appetites; and to make the laws of nature and virtue appear but as light things in your eyes. These I exhort you to avoid; to touch not, however slightly; for as poison is to the body so are these to the mind. Avoid them for the healthy and the good. It

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does not matter, says Seneca, how many, but how good books you have. When, therefore, you meet with a good book, treat it as you would a good friend; let it be your frequent companion. Cecil did so, and devoted a shelf for what he called his tried books. This shelf should be the best sought in your library. Faithfully read, they will afford you more satisfaction and profit than were you to skim over thousands of volumes, perused hurriedly and unreflectingly. The poet's well-known recommendation, to "drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring," assumes perhaps increased significance in our day, the great passion of which seems to be to acquire knowledge without labor. Self-deceiving, men will be unmindful that uncompromising effort and patient toil are inseparable conditions of all excellence, and that this first law of our constitution is irresistible. Eschew, then, that mere glancing at periodicals and superficial reading of popular works, that never yet fastened the bays and laurels around the student's brow. Follow the contrary course, and seek wisdom for herself alone. The pleasures she bestows never terminate in a sigh; and though she be usually grave, yet does she not always exclude the sportiveness of wit, though she may condemn its unbridled license and malignity. You will also require her as a lamp for your guidance in other directions. The literature of the present day exhibits, perhaps more than ever before, a tendency to question opinions however established by the lapse of ages; to overturn every thing, no matter how sacred it be deemed, that cannot be immediately squared with the views of hasty objectors. Now if stagnation be opposed, as it undoubtedly is, to that universal law which secures both mental and physical development, its reverse quality, activity, must, evidently, be good and proper. Yet, when you see this activity perverted into wrong channels, and elevated ignorance and presumption run-a-muck at those great fundamental truths which the whole civilized world avouches, it were well to reflect whether by the hasty and inconsiderate removal of the old land marks, there is not danger of falling into an abyss of utter confusion and darkness. At the same time, it were well to bethink you that each and all of you have fitting and legitimate guides to open your eyes to the danger, and to warn you from it. And you will evince at once the goodness of your heart and the wisdom of your head by ever exhibiting that respect for the teachers of religion, of whatsoever name they be, which their sacred vocation demands.

That thoroughness of study and acquirement to which I have just referred as opposed to superficiality, would imply that to excel, it were

necessary for you to select as your vocation one department of human learning or industry, and devote yourselves almost exclusively thereto. And it is even so. At a public meeting held in behalf of this University, a reverend speaker* said "he believed in some sectional love;—not in bigotry and prejudice that put down everything not one's own, and could see no beauty outside one's own door, but in a hearty identification of ourselves with our home." I would apply these enlightened words to the special department to which you may devote yourselves. Do not become so infatuated with it that you can see no beauty, no good outside of it, or you may now and again be as guilty of injustice as Alcibiades, who, it is said, boxed the ears of an unfortunate rhetorician because he did not possess the works of Homer. And let this toleration widen out and extend to a more sacred domain; and do you respect every man's religious convictions, while you enjoy your own. Be sure that no one will intentionally impose on himself in matters appertaining to his salvation; and freely accord to all, the rights and immunities which in this regard, you would desire for yourselves. Carry, you, gentlemen, the noble lesson taught by your Alma Mater, who receives into her fostering bosom every race, nationality and creed. And be assured that if this example were more generally followed abroad, and if men would as assiduously seek points of agreement as they seek points of difference, much of the acrimony, uncharitableness and ill-will that now array God's children against each other, would soon disappear, and prepare this earth for that universal diffusion of brotherhood, peace and happiness, so earnestly desired by the wise and the good.

Besides the improvement of your mental powers, another result of thoroughness of acquirement is a refined taste:

"Say what is taste, but the internal powers,
Active and strong, and feelingly alive,
To each fine impulse? a discerning sense
Of decent and sublime, with quick disgust
From things deform'd."

Now, although, as the poet teaches, a natural sensibility is essential to taste, still may it become improved by due cultivation of the perceptive powers, by comparison and experience. And I would bid you not to overlook its influence. For from the dress of our persons, the furniture of our dwellings, up to our sculpture, poetry, eloquence, music

* The Rev. Dr. Wilkes.

and all the arts which embellish life, its dominion is felt. It has also its laws of progress; and if, as we are told, the polished contemporaries of Horace blushed at the praises which their ancestors had bestowed on the dialogues of Plautus—to them so rude when compared with the elegant comedies of Terence, it should be evidently your ambition to assist in raising such a standard, that those who come after you may regard it with admiration and respect.

Closely connected with the cultivation of taste is a proper regard to what are popularly recognised as the accomplishments of life. To these a due degree of attention must needs be paid. Without suffering them to supersede sterner and more useful duties, those points that are essential to the demeanor of a gentleman, should not be overlooked. I allude, of course, to no mere affectation, but to that politeness which is the genuine result of goodness of heart and rectitude of mind. Without these latter, an elegant exterior and highly cultivated mental powers will be indeed but vain, and will certainly not at all elevate you above the frivolous and vicious whose companionship I have already referred to, as calculated to pollute the whole current of your moral life at its source, by instilling a disregard for all authority, whether of man or of God. One main antidote to the deleterious effects of such companionship, is self-respect. This, however, you are to distinguish from that overweening self-love which, as it has been justly said, can swallow any absurdity, however gross, when long pampered. Hollow assumption will only excite the contempt of the discerning; but a proper self-respect will generally secure to you the respect of others. Another such antidote is the love of fame. When Cæsar said he was satisfied with his share of life and fame, his sincerity was doubted; but not so the truthfulness of Alexander, when he exclaimed, "Oh, Athenians, how much do I suffer to be praised by you." But the most lowly, as well as an Alexander and a Cæsar, have not been exempt from the desire of admiration; and hence, it has been styled the universal passion. So long as you keep the vehemence of this passion within bounds, it is doubtless of proper salutary tendency. You will only constitute it a folly when you are more solicitous about the approbation of fallible man than that of the unerring judge of your own conscience. To listen to the high promptings of this conscience amidst all temptations, to hold fast to your integrity, and to determine that your heart shall not reproach you so long as you live, is to adopt for yourselves principles of honor the highest, as they are the most comprehensive. They will prove, if steadily adhered to, your safest guide in the slippery walks

of life. They will enable you to realize the truth which Plato taught, that it is equally the office of virtuous constancy to withstand the attacks of pain and the blandishments of pleasure. They will save you from temptations and discouragements which might otherwise overwhelm you; and will convert the howling desert of misfortune into a blooming paradise of joy.

But, gentlemen, I am warned by the lapse of time that I should bring these remarks to a close. And yet I would detain you for a brief space, while I once more, and for the last time, earnestly and solemnly warn you ever to bear in mind the important truth, that, as intelligent beings, you have been placed under a constitution of law which, as it has been devised by infinite wisdom, you cannot violate without detriment to your happiness both here and hereafter. Remember also that the infelicities of life are mainly in consequence of ignoring or violating these laws, and are to be regarded only as proofs of the infinite goodness of your Heavenly Father, who thus admonishes you to walk in the paths of obedience, and to develop and foster the mental and moral welfare of your being. Accordingly as you do this, will you advance, and cause others to advance; accordingly as you neglect this, will you retrograde and carry back others with you, adding to the multitude of woes ever found in the train of ignorance. Thus, then, must you influence even future generations; yes, even upon them must you leave your impress, whether for weal or for woe. And if you supply them with better means of educating themselves than you yourselves could find, you will have done an important work, a noble work, and you will not have lived in vain. And in this Province, especially, is this work required of you; for here we are but taking the first steps in the naturalization of science and educational improvement among us, and it becomes us to see that these steps are properly and wisely taken, so that we may fall in among the foremost and the best,—in the van, and not in the rear. Of the Spartans it is recorded that when their young men walked the streets their eyes were ever modestly lowered, and that one might as well anticipate the eye of a marble statue to be turned as theirs; but that in battle no one dared to look on them. Country was the all dominating idea with them, as it should be with you. So must you do battle for the intellectual and moral advancement of your country. To you let the words with all truth and appropriateness be applied—“*Qui didicit patriæ quid debet, et quid amicis.*” Equally modest and tolerant, you must yet gird yourselves to cope with error, and to spread light, or be for ever lost

to the applause of the good. In this glorious struggle you must quit yourselves like men ; for here are wanted no triflers, no insignificants, but zealous, earnest workers. Here too are wanted not superficiality but thoroughness ; not merely the graces, but also the virtues ; not hollow punctiliousness, but genial morality ; not a torpid lukewarmness, but a lively exercise of every faculty and talent. And wherever duty, wherever honor calls, there must you be, and dare to do all it becomes a man to do, to overcome ignorance and stem the torrent of prevailing immorality. And prevailing misery too ; for you must extend your view over all the wide field of practical benevolence, and unite yourselves with that glorious band of both sexes who are habitually engaged in assuaging the pains and alleviating the woes of mankind. Let it be your chief ambition thus to engage yourselves, so that responsive to the words but just now uttered by your representative, when you are called hence, you may leave the world better and happier for your having lived in it. And think not that your success in the battle of life will be viewed either coldly or uninterestedly. Nay, but on you do relatives, instructors, friends and society now turn their anxious eye, all alike desirous to see realized in you their best wishes, their fondest hopes. In your keeping there is placed the happiness of many others. On your behaviour will depend the progress of multitudes who will rise or sink accordingly as you shall adorn or disgrace your generation, accordingly as you shall fulfil or neglect the discharge of the various duties devolving upon you as conservators of those great moral and social privileges which must be transferred to your keeping when your predecessors have finished their allotted task, and their sand is run. You may thus be blessed as the benefactors, or become execrated as the enemies of humanity. It is given you to choose. But when mortal and immortal powers are interested in your choice ; when the great Searcher of all is watching you from Heaven his dwelling-place, and when those you respect and love best on earth are regarding you with earnest expectation and awful suspense, can I doubt what will be your choice ? No. It will be that which constitutes the whole duty of man, "TO FEAR GOD AND OBSERVE ALL HIS LAWS."

